IBM launches tool to create disabled-friendly mobile apps

Martin Anderson Tue 3 Mar 2015 1.24pm

IBM have released a new framework [PDF] to help developers ensure that their smartphone apps for iOs and Android meet the needs of a potential 1 billion users. The IBM Ability Lab Mobile Accessibility Checker (MAC) is designed to automate, document and audit the usability of cell-phone apps for people suffering from a range of possible impairments.

IBM Chief Accessibility Officer Frances West says: "Mobile technology has sparked a new era of opportunity for people of all ages and abilities, yet many mobile apps have design flaws that prevent people with disabilities and the elderly from using them effectively…Our researchers saw an opportunity to address this by inventing technology that identifies and corrects usability issues early in the software development process,"

MAC can make developers aware of a number of potential issues that disabled people might have with their mobile apps, addressing problems such as keyboard navigation and focus, color-contrasting and adherence to government regulations and industry standards. According to IBM's post, tools currently available do not check for a spectrum of possible weaknesses for disabled user, but focus instead on individual conditions.

Big Blue is rolling out the Mobile Accessibility Checker in association with accessibility software and services organization SSB BART Group, with the intention of developing a comprehensive mobile accessibility management platform into which MAC will be integrated. MAC is also being made available as a software component or service.

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Both iOs and Android have existing native functionality intended for disabled users, and a range of third-party apps; on Android there's the BIG Launcher, an outsize departure point for your installed apps; Hear You Now on iOs is a free sound amplifier aimed at users with hearing difficulties; the ICE Standard with Smart911 free app not only allows disabled US iOs users to display potentially necessary medical information on the Lock Screen of their iPhones, but also provides these details automatically to 911 operators in the event of an emergency.

The National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association also provides information about a range of apps for disabled users of all ages.